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ABSTRACT

An estimated 246 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 work in the agricultural, industrial, and craft sectors worldwide. Approximately 180 million of these children work under the worst forms of child labor as defined by the International Labor Organization (2002). In spite of conventions and protocols designed to eradicate the worst forms of child labor, international human rights violations concerning children persist in the workplace. This Digest defines child labor and its worst forms within the context of international human rights, describes several key protocols and conventions aimed at eliminating these worst forms, proposes a rationale for teaching about certain issues in child labor, and offers parameters for choosing instructional strategies that teach about the worst forms of child labor. Lists six Web sites which contain resources and information on teaching human rights and child labor. (Contains 11 references.) (BT)

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Teaching about Child Labor and International Human Rights

by Gregory E. Hamot and Elizabeth S. Jensen

Children constitute part of the labor force in virtually every country. An estimated 246 million people between the ages of 5 and 17 work in the agricultural, industrial, and craft sectors worldwide. Approximately 180 million of these children work under the worst forms of child labor as defined by the International Labor Organization (2002). In spite of conventions and protocols designed to eradicate the worst forms of child labor, international human rights violations concerning children in the workplace persist. This Digest defines child labor and its worst forms within the context of international human rights, describes several key protocols and conventions aimed at eliminating these worst forms, proposes a rationale for teaching about certain issues in child labor, and offers parameters for choosing instructional strategies that teach about the worst forms of child labor.

Child Labor and Its Worst Forms. Not all economic activity performed by children is necessarily a "worst form" of child labor. The International Labor Organization (ILO) distinguishes between acceptable forms of work by children and child labor that should be eradicated. The ILO defines child labor as "all children under 15 years of age who are economically active excluding (i) those who are under five years old and (ii) those between 12-14 years old who spend less than 14 hours a week on their jobs, unless their activities or occupations are hazardous by nature or circumstance" (ILO 2002, 32).

Of course, any form of labor that endangers a child, denies a child's right to an education, or exposes a child to illicit activities is unacceptable. The unacceptable, worst forms of child labor include work such as bonded labor, prostitution and pornography, illicit activities, armed combat, and physically and mentally hazardous labor. These worst forms manifest themselves in violations of a nation's minimum age laws; threats to a child's physical, mental, or emotional well-being; intolerable abuses such as child slavery, forced labor, or hazardous working conditions; illicit activities such as drug and contraband trafficking or debt bondage; and work that prevents a child from going to school.

Protocols and Conventions. In 1973, the ILO adopted Convention 138, commonly known as the Minimum Age Convention, which sought to regulate the minimum acceptable age for different categories of work ranging from light work to work that is hazardous to a child's growth and development. In most cases, 15 is the minimum acceptable age, but in some underdeveloped countries age 14 is allowable (ILO 1973).

For years after Convention 138 was adopted, scholars and activists debated its effectiveness to progressively eliminate child labor and began working toward a more effective solution. Eventually, the ILO adopted a new convention. ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, unanimously adopted by ILO member countries in June 1999, was aimed at the immediate elimination of intolerable forms of child labor (ILO 1999). Convention 182 has focused the attention of the ILO, various national governments, and civil society organizations' resources on working toward eliminating child labor.

The United Nations also adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. The CRC is the most widely ratified convention in the history of the United Nations. Two specific protocols related to the CRC that deal with the worst forms of child labor were also adopted--one dealing with prostitution and pornography and the other addressing the issue of children in armed combat situations (United Nations 1989).

These conventions and protocols are only a handful of the international human rights instruments that are relevant to child labor. In addition, Articles 23 and 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights seek to guarantee "just and favorable conditions of work" and the "right to education," both of which are violated constantly and globally through the exercise of the worst forms of child labor (United Nations 1948).

Rationale and Issues for Teaching and Learning. Despite the widespread adoption of these international conventions, declarations, and protocols, child labor continues in our global society. Given the nexus between international human rights and the worst forms of child labor, students need to know and understand the international laws and conventions that protect them and other students around the world from unfair, harmful, and cruel child labor practices. As citizens of the twenty-first century, students should be prepared to recognize and evaluate the conditions and situations under which approximately 180 million of their peers work and live each day. The ultimate goal of such learning experiences is for students to become motivated to act on behalf of all the children of the world in abolishing the violations of human rights found in the damaging and harmful practices associated with child labor. Failure to abolish child labor in general, in particular its "worst forms," has led to the suggestion that the issue of child labor is not simply an issue of worker rights or child rights, but an issue of basic human rights which apply to all human beings. Thus, any curriculum that addresses human rights as a national or international imperative would include child labor as a pertinent topic.

Levels of income, forms of democratic constitutionalism, and cultural regard for education are all determinants in the plight of children in the workforce. Data show that in places where working parents are able to improve working conditions and establish acceptable labor standards (such as adequate salaries), children are much less likely to have to work and, therefore, are much less likely to become victims of harmful labor practices that deny them the essentials of education that underpin a democratic society (Swinnerton and Willcutts 2000, 17).

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Choosing Instructional Strategies. Felisa Tibbitts developed three models for teaching about human rights that emerged from her research in several countries (2002). By their nature, these models also apply to teaching about child labor as an aspect of human rights. Each of the models—the values and awareness model, the accountability model, and the transformational model— is tailored to a different teaching style and approach. Regarding the knowledge component of a curriculum that teaches about child labor, The University of Iowa Center for Human Rights (UICHR), through a contract with the United States Department of Labor, is compiling the largest database on child labor laws and statistics in the world. As part of this contract, the UICHR began developing pre-collegiate curricular models that emphasize the following knowledge and skills objectives for learning about child labor that should be included in any course or set of instructional materials that deal with this human rights topic on an international scale. They recommend that students studying child labor, especially its worst forms, should be able to:

(1) recognize and understand international laws, protocols and conventions enacted to abolish or ameliorate harmful child labor practices around the world, as set forth particularly in ILO Conventions 138 and 182, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

(2) understand reasons for the failure of many of these laws and conventions;

(3) become knowledgeable about all forms and practices of child labor, particularly those identified as the "worst forms"; understand the context and/or culture in which child labor is often used or practiced; and

(4) develop ideas and commit to action and activities that will significantly aid in the eradication of child labor everywhere.

Essentially, Tibbitts and the UICHR offer criteria for developing and making decisions about instructional materials that offer students and teachers a well-considered approach to learning about child labor, a topic in international human rights that is as delicate as it is important for the advancement of the rights of children everywhere.

Internet Resources. The following Web sites contain resources and information on teaching human rights and child labor:

Children's Rights Information Network This site includes resources, events, news, and links related to child labor as well as information on themes within child labor: < www.crin.org>.

The International Labor Organization The text of both the ILO Convention 138 and Convention 182 and ratification information as well as statistics and definitions of child labor and hazardous child labor are all provided on this site: <www.ilo.org>.

Free the Children Craig Kielburger's Web site is based on his remarkable quest for the elimination of the worst forms of child labor. The Web site includes school kits, resources, books, and primary sources: <www.freethechildren.org>.

Rethinking Schools Online This site includes articles, lesson plans, and material to use when teaching human rights and child labor issues. <www.rethinkingschools.org>.

UNICEF <www.unicef.org> is a key promoter of children's rights. This specific UNICEF site includes classroom activities, resources, and links to other Web sites: <www.unicef.ca/eng/unicef/sch_election/main.html>.

United Nations This Web site is dedicated exclusively to resources for teaching human rights. <www.un.org/Pubs/k12/educate.htm>.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche, paper, or electronic full text from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield Virginia, 22153-2852; World Wide Web <edrs.com>; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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